

# The elements of popular culture in “The Great Gatsby”

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**Abstract-** That period was characterized by economic prosperity and tremendous social, artistic, and cultural dynamism. The Twenties witnessed the large usage of automobiles, telephones, motion pictures, accessible electricity, as well as accelerated consumer demand and aspirations, and brought about significant changes in lifestyle and culture. Social and cultural innovations began in leading metropolitan centers such as Chicago, New York, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia, then spread more widely. Popular culture in the 1920s was characterized by innovation in film, visual art and architecture, radio, music, dance, fashion, literature, and intellectual movements.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Great Gatsby” was published by *Scribners* on 10 April 1925. The quintessential tale of the glory and tragedy of American aspiration won Fitzgerald great critical respect. It also helped create a caricature of the era that continues to this day. “The popular impression of the Twenties as a time of hedonism, alcoholic orgies, and high jinks is in some part based on misreadings of Fitzgerald’s fiction,” wrote Matthew J. Bruccoli, a Fitzgerald scholar. “Gatsby’s party has become the quintessential Twenties party. Fitzgerald’s characters have become confused with the cartoons of sheiks in raccoon coats and flappers in short skirts. Fitzgerald’s view of the Twenties was serious and complex, for he recognized the glamour as well as the waste, the charm as well as the self-destruction”.

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby” is considered one of the great American novels of the 20th century. It defines the era that came to be known as the “Jazz Age,” a phrase coined by Fitzgerald himself. The novel focuses on four central characters, the narrator Nick Carraway, wealthy young couple Tom and Daisy Buchanan and a wealthy mystery man Jay Gatsby, in Long Island’s North Shore. In a way that celebrities set the standard for current popular culture, this novel illustrates the culture in a post-war, Prohibition world. Given its continued popularity, the novel has had numerous reference in popular culture and film. Fitzgerald utilizes societal developments of the 1920s to build Gatsby’s stories from simple details like automobiles, the evolution of jazz music, flapper culture, to broader themes like Fitzgerald’s discreet allusions to the organized crime culture and bootlegging which was the source of Gatsby’s fortune. Fitzgerald educates his readers about the garish society of the Roaring Twenties by placing a timeless, relatable plotline within the historical context of the era.

Gatsby seems to believe that he can create a personality based on the values of American popular culture. Thus, at the age of seventeen, he defines for himself a completely new identity. Gatsby hears “the drums of his destiny” as defined by a version of the American dream of success that applies to m

The story of Jay Gatsby, shown from the perspective of Gatsby’s friend and neighbour, Nick Carraway, a bonds salesman in New York. As the readers can observe, Gatsby is represented as a young, mysterious millionaire with shady business connections (later revealed that he was a bootlegger), who originally came from North Dakota. He was in love with Daisy Buchanan, a love that bore an untamed obsession in its essence. Other important characters are Daisy Buchanan, Tom Buchanan, and Myrtle Wilson.

Gatsby was fascinated by the same New York crowds that provide the background for Fitzgerald. In the novel, Fitzgerald writes with authority about ads, photos, automobiles, magazines, and Broadway musical as if these things too fuel the energies of art “the cars from New York are parked five deep in the drive, and already the halls and salones and verandas are gaudy with primary colors and hair shoren in strange new ways and shawls beyond the dreams of Castle”. Productions, entertainment, style, and consumption are native subjects of Modernism, often displaying what is merely natural.

The world Jay Gatsby is a version of the new social world feared by the tradition of American moralists, it is a world of broken relationships and false relationships; a world of money and success rather than of social responsibility – a world in which individuals are all too free to determine their moral destinies.

Gatsby’s idea of the good life seems merely to be the acquisition of money, things, real estate. Possibly the most famous literary possession of the twentieth century is his car, in “a dich cream color, bright with nickle, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with a triumphant hatboxes and supper-boxes and tool boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirror a dozen suns.”

Gatsby’s house is a showcase of consumption. He is materialistic because Americans did not have many other alternatives. Material life offered one of the few recognized ways in which the Americans could express their idea

The readers face racism in The Great Gatsby, such as when Tom states that “it’s up to the dominant race to watch out or these other races will have control of things.” The story took place in a time of radical changes. Tom, and all of the others who were currently wealthy, resisted change because it threatened his comfortable way of life. However, this discrimination is kept out of sight until the chaos at the Plaza Hotel. As Tom and Gatsby fight over Daisy’s love, Tom claims that: “Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institution and next they’ll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white”. Though Gatsby’s lavish parties certainly embody the “American Dream,” Fitzgerald used these two instances to subtly remind the readers that the white population was not the only ones who were restlessly moving around the social life of America.

“As a state of mind and a dream, America had existed long before its discovery. Ever since the early days of Western civilization, peoples had dreamed of a lost Paradise, of a Golden Age characterized by abundance, absence of war, and absence of toil. With the first accounts of the New World, it was felt that these dreams and yearnings had become a fact, a geographical reality fraught with unlimited possibilities

During the 1920s, the perception of the American Dream was that an individual can achieve success in life regardless of family history or social status if they only work hard enough. The American Dream originated in the early days of the American settlement, with the mostly poor immigrants searching for opportunities. It was first manifested in the Declaration of Independence, which describes an attitude of hope. The Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal and that they are endowed with certain unalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and pursuit of happiness”. In “The Great Gatsby”, the American Dream plays a big role. In the novel you can see what happened to it during the 1920s. The values totally changed - instead of striving for equality, people just wanted to get as rich as they could.

The culture of the wealthy Americans represented in the novel was defined mainly by consumerism and excessive material wealth. Wherever given the opportunity, Jay Gatsby is inclined to ostentation as shown in his flamboyant dressing style, what Tom refers to as his “circus wagon” car, and of course, his huge mansion where he throws lavish, drunken parties.

This was a boisterous period characterized by rapidly changing lifestyles, financial excesses, and the fast pace of technological progress. Life moved fast as a new sense of prosperity and freedom emerged at the end of World War I. New technology became available for ordinary citizens, such as the telephone, radio, and

As Fitzgerald’s description of technology in “The Great Gatsby” indicates -those speedy green and white and yellow automobiles driven by Gatsby, Jordan ,and Daisy, could indeed symbolise the pleasure-seeking irresponsibility and self-centredness of the generation and the era.

Another prominent aspect of the twenties in America was the ban on alcohol, i. e. the Prohibition. Though it shaped the entire decade to a great extent, the enforcement of this new law was sporadic and underfunded, faced with opposition in many states and big cities, even in small towns, where many prohibition laws were repealed. Prohibition mainly had an impact on beer-drinking working classes who could not afford bootleg liquor, and not on the crème de la crème, who set much of the tone and style of the decade. Given the lax enforcement of the law, many Americans viewed prohibition as something of a joke. Bootleggers smuggled liquor, while speakeasies in every city provided alcohol illegally. Organized crime controlled the distribution of alcohol in major American cities. Most towns totally depended upon booze and beer, as prostitution and gambling spread. But prohibition failed not because it was institutionally impossible but because it was more than an institutional reform. It was a ‘symbolic reform’ which gave recognition and legitimacy to the norms and values of rural, Protestant America, of the old America, all the while the average American became more enamored of wealth and everyday luxuries, fun, money, sex, dance, and wasting time.

Throughout this essay, the historical surge is put into focus, given it has had a large and noticeable change in the history of North America, a change that touched mainstream culture of the period - a wealth-driven culture. The change can be easily seen in everyday life of the 1920s Americans, such as in fashion, automobiles, technology, electric tools and appliances that became required depending on the economic possibilities of the American households.

A deep sense of disillusionment was created by the violence of the war; many viewed the war as an extended act of senseless brutality that destroyed the innocence neglected by the society at the turn of the 20th century. Large numbers of Americans wanted to regain their own identity and accomplish their dreams through materialism. What became a widespread dream for the masses, was the pursuit of pleasures and obtaining money in any way, even illegally, via organized crime.

This unstable social atmosphere of the Roaring Twenties was shown in the character of Great Gatsby who, as well as almost anybody else at the time, tried to achieve his dream of becoming well-off and marrying a classy girl he loved deeply. By using Gatsby's dream, Fitzgerald portrayed the American Dream, one of the main pillars that has constituted the USA since it won its independence.

## II. CONCLUSION

From my point of view, these changes in life and culture had a positive side too, for they helped in breaking the restrictions and norms that imprisoned people. Americans could now express their opinions and choose what they wanted or needed without any interference imposed by religion and tradition, which was not allowed before the Jazz Age.

Among the most important of these freedoms was the liberation of women from the constraints in their lives. Women were finally able to participate in society's decision-making, they were no longer attached to kitchen and housekeeping affairs. Women fought for their right to vote like men, the right to decide on the job they considered appropriate for them, the freedom to pick the style of their clothes, and determine the course of their own life as it pleased them, with no male intervention whatsoever.

Despite their negative sides, such as the susceptibility to criminal activities, the Roaring Twenties were the years of women's social upheaval, the years for tremendous changes in the organization of life in general.

The change similar to the American exists and is tangible in the Arabic societies as well - here we have the same example of materialism becoming the inevitable cultural element. However, the Arabs reject any change that may affect the customs and traditions of the majority of citizens. They remain closed, unwilling to accept new ideas that could shake their religious beliefs. Secularism would be a huge step forward in the government of the Arabic countries, people would understand better their human rights and a gift of free will, like Americans did in the Roaring Twenties.

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